



DAVE THOMAS
FOUNDATION
FOR ADOPTION®

Finding Forever Families for Children in Foster Care

Testimony of

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Submitted to the

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HUMAN RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

For the hearing on

Improving Programs Designed to Protect At-Risk Youth

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There is no more important work in this country than assuring the safety and well-being of our most vulnerable citizens – children who, through no fault of their own, are in the child welfare system waiting for a permanent family. Thank you to the members of the Subcommittee for their commitment to reviewing and assessing existing policy and practice on behalf of these children, with a vigilant eye on providing the most effective evidence-based services on their behalf. The Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare program and the Promoting Safe and Stable Families program provide critical Federal funding through the Social Security Act for children who need and deserve our very best efforts.

For nearly twenty years, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has shared the Subcommittee's quest to elevate and dramatically improve the services we provide to abused, neglected, dependent and abandoned children for whom the government has assumed temporary, but frequently long-term responsibility. Created in 1992 by Dave Thomas, who was adopted, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption works to dramatically increase the number of adoptions of waiting children from the United States foster care system, while providing information, resources and educational materials to potential adoptive parents, individuals and organizations, at no cost to the user. Additionally, as a national non-profit public charity, we provide grants to public and private organizations in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to results-based agencies that aggressively and measurably move children out of foster care and into adoptive homes.

Although we are encouraged by an increasing national awareness about the needs of foster care youth¹ (and in particular about children waiting to be adopted), a decline in children entering care and greater numbers of children being adopted from foster care², we are gravely concerned about older youth waiting to be adopted. For the past decade, the number of older children adopted from foster care has remained unchanged. Additionally, most recent reporting noted 29,000 of the nearly 115,000 children waiting to be adopted from foster care were on the track for aging out of the system without a permanent family.³ The unfortunate outcomes for children

¹ Harris Interactive, *National Adoption Attitudes Survey*, commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 2007.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2009 Estimates as of July 2010 (17).

³ Ibid.

aging out of care are well-documented, and include significantly higher percentages than the general population of being undereducated, unemployed or underemployed, homeless, becoming teen or young parents, and an increased likelihood for arrest. These numbers have not declined and in fact are trending higher.

Since these youth have typically spent the longest periods of time in care, the core issues of the abuse or neglect which they have experienced are exacerbated by frequent moves while in care, potential separation from siblings, multiple school or educational placements and frequent turnover of social worker or other system contacts in their lives. The children most at risk of aging out and moving into society without the safety net of a family and a home, the youth who suffer the consequences of the government's broken promise of a family, are the children for whom the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has dedicated its energy, expertise and resources.

Strategies for recruiting and matching adoptive families for these children have a history of anecdotal rather than evidence-based development. Cataloging children online or through the media is common practice and supported by federal funding, but there is scant evidence to suggest it is an effective method for effectively recruiting appropriate families for America's longest waiting children with individualized and often clinical needs.

In response, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has dedicated significant resources to develop, implement and grow a national model of child-focused recruitment (Wendy's Wonderful Kids⁴) combined with long-term rigorous experimental evaluation of the model. The program has grown from six pilot sites in 2004 to now 122 fully funded sites in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and 4 provinces in Canada. Of the 122 individual sites, 20 underwent a randomized control trial; although the full evaluation will not be released until October 2011, preliminary results show that the children in the experimental group were significantly more likely to be adopted with the greatest positive impact on older children. The national evaluation of Wendy's Wonderful Kids is the first ever randomized control trial of an adoption recruitment effort that has demonstrated success and is supporting one of the nation's largest databases of

⁴ Child-Focused Recruitment Model, see attachment, p.6

information on the more than 7,000 children served to date. Of these children, nearly 3,000 have had a finalized adoption or are in their pre-adoptive placement simply waiting for the final adoption court hearing and another 3,500 have had potential families identified. Of the children successfully served, 45 percent are age twelve or older, 27 percent have experienced six or more placements, 50 percent have been in the system more than four years, 10 percent have been in care for more than 10 years, and 21 percent had a failed or disrupted adoption prior to this program.

As the Subcommittee looks to reauthorize these important programs, it is imperative to assure that evidence-based practices define how we serve America's at-risk and vulnerable children waiting to be adopted. Scarce resources must be used most effectively and, given the national success of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption model recruitment program, we would ask the Subcommittee to consider:

1. Retain the 20 percent set-aside for adoption with a focus on older child adoption. In support of this, it is critical that the Department of Health and Human Services provide technical assistance to states on evidence-based practice for adoption.
2. Reauthorize the Court Improvement Program with specific attention to adoption, including more aggressive use of concurrent planning as required in the Adoption and Safe Families Act; amending the statute to support court strategies to shorten the time between termination of parental rights and adoption; and to support evidence-based practices from the personnel who come before the court on behalf of the youth waiting to be adopted.
3. Aggressively assess the current \$20 million set-aside for caseworker visits. States are making significant progress on visits and the Child and Family Services Reviews support this effort. To put this scale of funding in perspective, an expenditure of \$20 million for model recruitment for older youth, based on the history of the Foundation's evidence-based program, would assure the adoptions of thousands of older youth previously at risk of aging out of the system without a family. Redirecting this significant source of

funding toward older child adoption based on a platform of success can turn the tide of a decade of older youth lingering in care and aging out.

Finally, we are grateful for the Subcommittee members' commitment to understanding, addressing and elevating the national work for children who have suffered not only abuse and neglect but the grief and loss of family that they must also endure. Dave Thomas reminded us daily that "these children are not someone else's responsibility; they are our responsibility." Thank you for understanding that the promise of a family for 115,000 children is the responsibility of each of us charged with their care, and for your continued efforts to improve programs to protect vulnerable and at-risk youth.

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⁴ ATTACHMENT - WENDY'S WONDERFUL KIDS CHILD-FOCUSED RECRUITMENT MODEL

In 2004, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption created *Wendy's Wonderful Kids* in response to the national crisis of children lingering in foster care without a permanent family. Through the *Wendy's Wonderful Kids* program, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is currently funding 122 adoption recruiters across the nation whose work focuses exclusively on finding permanent adoptive homes for children waiting in foster care.

Child-Focused Recruitment Strategy

Effective, aggressive and accountable recruitment activities are critical to the success of *Wendy's Wonderful Kids*. Recruiters carry caseloads of 15-20 of America's longest waiting children and work toward ambitious adoption and child match goals. Rather than casting a broad net of general awareness and recruitment campaigns or defaulting to internet photo listings, media profiles of children or public photography displays, *Wendy's Wonderful Kids* recruiters are expected to be agents of change in the lives of the children for whom they are recruiting and employ an intensive and exhaustive evidence-based child-focused recruitment strategy.

The child-focused recruitment strategy is based on a specific aggressive recruitment plan tailored for the individual child based on their unique circumstances, challenges, desires and needs and includes, but is not limited to, the following key components:

Relationship with Child: Recruiters meet with the child regularly to develop trust and openness. This relationship is essential to building an effective recruitment plan.

Case Record Review: Recruiters conduct an in-depth review of the existing case file. An exhaustive case record review includes identification of all significant people in the child's life past and present, including potential adoptive parents.

Network Building: Recruiters meet with significant adults identified in the case record review and maintain regular and ongoing contact. Regular contact with individuals close to and knowledgeable about the child facilitates effective recruitment and matching.

Child Assessment and Recruitment Plan: Recruiters determine the child's strengths, challenges, desires, preparedness for adoption and whether the child has needs that should be addressed before moving forward with the adoption process. Based on the file review, interviews with significant adults, assessment of and input from the child, recruiters develop a comprehensive recruitment plan. The plan for each child is customized and defined by the child's needs.

Diligent Search: Recruiters conduct a diligent search of potential adoptive families and identified connections to additional resources and pursue aggressive follow-up with contacts identified, with the knowledge and approval of the child's caseworker.